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(Khandha) Dukkha Sutta

The (Aggregate) Discourse on Suffering | S 22.104/3:158 f

Theme: The “basic set” of the 4 truths

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2013

Introduction

1 THE “BASIC SET” OF TRUTHS. The (Khandha) Dukkha Sutta (S 22.104) is perhaps the most succinct discourse on the 4 truths, and might be even amongst the oldest texts, if not *the* oldest text, that we have of the teaching. The most famous statement on the four truths are of course found in **the Dhamma,cakka Pavattana Sutta** (S 56.11),¹ which however seems to be a late canonical sutta.² But it is the statement on the 4 truths given here in the (Khandha) Dukkha Sutta that is the “basic set.”³

2 THE “NOBLE” TRUTHS

2.1 THE TRUTHS THAT LIBERATE. One clue to its lateness is the use of *ariya* or “noble” as a qualifier for the 4 truths, as found in **the Dhamma,cakka Pavattana Sutta** (S 56.11). The older texts, such as **the Bhaya Bherava Sutta** (M 4)⁴ and **the (Khandha) Dukkha Sutta** (S 22.104) here, refer to these truths without *ariya*. The Bhaya Bherava Sutta, for example, presents the 4 truths as the *content* of the Buddha’s awakening, that is, his realization according to true reality, which fully liberates him from suffering and rebirth, and makes him the self-awakened Buddha.⁵

2.3 WHY THE TRUTHS ARE “NOBLE.” The qualifier *ariya* serves, amongst other things, to remind us that the mastering of the truths is the key to the path to awakening. Hence, the sutta compilers felt justified to add *ariya* to the names of the four truths. The commentaries give us other reasons why the truths are called “noble” (*ariya*).

Both Buddhaghosa and Dhammapāla, in their commentaries, agree in giving the “noble truths” (*ariyassa saccāni*) the same range of definitions. While Buddhaghosa gives his definitions in his magnum opus, **the Visuddhi,magga**,⁶ and **the Sammoha,vinodanī** (the Vibhaṅga Commentary),⁷ Dhamma,pāla gives his in the **Param’attha,dīpanī 2** (his commentary to the Iti,vuttaka).⁸

Buddhaghosa (Vism 16.20/495)

- (1) Because the noble ones, such as the Buddhas, penetrate them, therefore, they are called noble truths [the noble one’s truths].⁹
- (2) Furthermore, they are the truths of the Noble One [the Buddha], too: hence, they are “noble

Dhammapāla (ItA 1:85)

- (1) Because they are to be attained by the noble ones, they are “noble truths,” and because they are truths that are non-falsehood [correctness], they are called “noble truths.”¹⁰
- (2) Or, they are truths that bring about nobleness, hence, they are “noble truths.”¹¹

¹ S 56.11/5:420-424 = SD 1.1.

² On the lateness of Dhamma,cakka Pavattana S (S 56.11), see **Notion of diṭṭhi**, SD 40a.1 (2.2).

³ This is K R Norman’s term, which he uses to refer to the passage in **Bhaya Bherava S** (M 4,31/1:23,14-17), SD 44.4: see Norman, “The four noble truths,” 1982:379 §2.2 = *Collected Works II*, 1991:212 f. The (Khandha) Dukkha S formula, however, is even more basic.

⁴ M 4,31/1:23,14-17 = SD 44.4.

⁵ M 4,31/1:23,14-17 = SD 44.4.

⁶ Vism 16.20/495.17.

⁷ VbhA 84,23-85.4.

⁸ ItA 1:85,8 f.

⁹ *Yasmā pan’etāni buddhādayo ariyā paṭivijjhanti, tasmā ariya,saccānīti vuccanti.*

¹⁰ *Ariya,saccānīti araṇīyato ariyāni avitathā,bhāvena saccāni cāti ariya,saccāni.* Here Dhamma,pāla uses an alliterative wordplay on *araṇīyato ariyāni* (“to be approached by the noble ones”), which avoids Buddhaghosa’s tautology in his def (4). This phrase is also found in Dhamma,pāla’s def (4), where it has a different sense. See K R Norman gives a different tr of this phrase: “Why are the Four Noble Truths called ‘Noble’?” 1991:12 = *Collected Papers IV*, 1993:173.

truths” [the noble one’s truth].”¹²

- (3) Or, because of the attainment of nobleness on account of awakening to them [the ennobling truths].¹³
- (4) Or, because they are truths that are noble; hence, they are “noble truths.”¹⁵
- (3) Or, they are truths to be penetrated by noble ones such as the Buddha; hence, they are “noble truths.”¹⁴
- (4) Also because the “noble truths” are the truths of the Noble One; for, he is the noble Blessed One who is to be approached as a refuge in the world with its devas; on account of these truths of his that he has seen with self-born knowledge, that they are “noble truths.”¹⁶

Similar, often identical, explanations of why the truths are called “noble” are also found in **the Param’attha, jotikā 1**, the commentary to the Khuddaka, pāṭha (KhpA 81), **Sammoha, vinodanī** (VbhA 84), **the Saddhamma-p, pakāsini**, and the commentary to the Paṭisambhidā, magga (PmA 1:62).¹⁷

3 THE 3 PHASES, 12 ASPECTS. Furthermore, the Dhamma, cakka Pavattana Sutta also contains a unique passage, called “the 3 phases and 12 aspects” of the truths, which sound almost Abhidhamma-like. In fact, this passage is not found anywhere in the suttas. The Chinese Āgama version of the Sutta also has “the 3 phases and 12 aspects,” but they differ in their sequence. It is likely that both the Pali and the Chinese versions have each been compiled from a different urtext, or were composed separately.¹⁸

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The (Aggregate) Discourse on Suffering

S 22.104/3:158 f

1 Originating at Sāvattihī

The 4 truths of suffering

- 2 Bhikshus, I will teach you about
- | | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| suffering, and | <i>dukkha</i> |
| the arising of suffering, and | <i>dukkha, samudaya</i> |
| the ending of suffering, and | <i>dukkha, nirodha</i> |
| the way to the ending of suffering. | <i>dukkha, nirodha, gāminiñ paṭipada</i> |

¹¹ *Ariya, bhāva, karāni vā saccāni ariya, saccāni*. Also at AA 2:181 which quotes Vism; ThaA 2:205, cf 3:198.

¹² *Api ca ariyassa saccānīti pi ariya, saccāni*.

¹³ *Athavā etesam* abhisambuddhattā ariya, bhāva, siddhito pi ariya, saccāni*; cf VAṬ:Be 3:171. *So Be, HOS; Ee *ekesam*; VAṬ:Be *etassa*.

¹⁴ *Ariyehi vā budd’ādihi paṭivijjhatabbāni saccāni ariya, saccāni*.

¹⁵ *Api ca kho pana ariyāni saccānīti pi ariya, saccāni*. And he immediately explains: “‘Noble’ means ‘they are true, not untrue, not deceiving’ (*ariyānīti tathāni avitathāni avisaṃvādakānīti attho*). This is of course tautological, ie, “the true truths”; cf Dhammapāla’s def (1).

¹⁶ *Athavā ariyassa saccāni ariya, saccāni, sa, devakena hi lokena saraṇan’ti araṇiyato ariyo bhagavā, tena sayambhū, nāṇena diṭṭhattā tassa saccānīti ariya, saccāni*. The phrase *araṇiyato ariyāni* is also found in Buddhaghosa’s def (1), where it has a different sense.

¹⁷ Further see **Dhamma, cakka Pavattana S** (S 56.11) @ SD 1.1 (4.4). For a philological analysis, see K R Norman, 1991:11-13 = 1993:171-174.

¹⁸ See **Dhamma, cakka Pavattana S** (S 56.11) @ SD 1.1 (6.2).

3 Listen!¹⁹The 1st truth4 And what, bhikshus, is **suffering**?

It should be said: The five aggregates of clinging.

5 And what, bhikshus, are the five? (They are:)

- (1) the aggregate of clinging that is form;
- (2) the aggregate of clinging that is feeling;
- (3) the aggregate of clinging that is perception;
- (4) the aggregate of clinging that is formations;
- (5) the aggregate of clinging that is consciousness.

rūp 'upādāna-k,khandha
vedan 'upādāna-k,khandha
saññ 'upādāna-k,khandha
saṅkhār 'upādāna-k,khandha
viññāṇ 'upādāna-k,khandha

6 This, bhikshus, is suffering.

The 2nd truth7 And what, bhikshus, is **the arising of suffering**?8 It is this craving that leads to renewed existence [rebirth], accompanied by pleasure and lust, seeking pleasure here and there; that is to say,²⁰

- (1) the craving for sensual pleasures,
- (2) the craving for existence,
- (3) the craving for non-existence [for extinction].

kāma,tanḥā
bhava,tanḥā
vibhava,tanḥā

9 This, bhikshus, is called the arising of suffering.

The 3rd truth10 And what, bhikshus, is **the ending of suffering**?11 It is the utter fading away and ending of that very craving, giving it up, letting it go, being free from it, being detached from it.²¹

12 This, bhikshus, is called the ending of suffering.

The 4th truth

13 And what, bhikshus, is the end that is the way leading to the ending of suffering?

14 It is this very noble eightfold path, that is to say,

- (1) right view, *sammā,dīṭṭhi*
- (2) right thought [right intention], *sammā,saṅkappa*
- (3) right speech, *sammā,vācā*
- (4) right action, *sammā,kamm 'antā*
- (5) right livelihood, *sammā,ājīva*
- (6) right effort, *sammā,vāyāma*
- (7) right mindfulness, *sammā,sati*

¹⁹ *Tam suṇātha*, lit “you listen!” which is the imperative mood.

²⁰ Comy to **Bhāra S** (S 22.22 = SD 17.14): “Seeking delight here and there” (*tatra,tatrābhinandinī*) means having the habit of seeking delight in the place of rebirth or among the various objects, such as forms. “**Craving for sense-pleasures**” (*kāma,tanḥā*) means lust for the five cords of sense-pleasures. Lust for form-sphere existence or formless-sphere existence, attachment to dhyana, and lust accompanied by the eternalist view: this is called “**craving for existence**” (*bhava,tanḥā*). Lust accompanied by the annihilationist view is “craving for annihilation [extermination]” (*vibhava,tanḥā*). (SA 2:264). **Bodhi**: “This explanation of the last two kinds of craving seems to me too narrow. More likely, craving for existence should be understood as the principal desire to continue in existence (whether supported by a view or not), craving for extermination as the desire for a complete end to existence, based on an underlying assumption (not necessarily formulated as a view) that such extermination brings an end to a real ‘I’.” (S:B 1052 n38)

²¹ *Yo tassā,y'eva [or tassa-y-eva] tanḥāya asesā,virāga,nirodho cāgo paṭinissaggo mutti anālayo.*

(8) right concentration. *sammā,samādhi*

15 This, bhikshus, is called the way leading to the ending of suffering.

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